



Helena Forde, del. et lith.

From a photograph from life by Victor A. Froul.

THE SOOTY OPOSSUM.
(*PHALANGISTA FULIGINOSA.*)

Sydney, N. S. W.—Thomas Richards, Government Printer.—1869.

The Sooty Phalanger.

(PHALANGISTA FULIGINOSA.)

THIS large Phalanger, a variety of the common mainland species, is peculiar to Tasmania, and either of the same colour as the *Phalangista vulpina* or deep sooty-brown, and occasionally almost black. The fur, however, is thicker and longer, and the darker skins are much valued for the manufacture of the famous Black Opossum rugs, which form a considerable item of Tasmanian exports. The dark variety is peculiar to the island, and not even found in Southern Victoria, where the colder climate would probably be congenial to its habit and economy, which are the same as those of the grey variety—the Vulpine Phalanger, better known as the common or “Brush-tail Opossum.”

General colour brown-black, darker on the back; muzzle, chin, feet, and ears externally, black; throat, chest, and abdomen, of a fulvous brown colour—the last-mentioned part of a deeper hue than the chest, &c. The ears are naked internally, or nearly so; externally they are well clothed with fur, excepting near the point and along the anterior margin, which parts are covered with small adpressed hairs. About six inches of the apical portion of the tail is naked beneath.

Mr. Waterhouse, than whom a better authority on our Mammalia does not exist, gives it as his opinion “that as the almost black specimens are sent from Tasmania, accompanied with others which are of very deep rufous-brown tint, much suffused with black on the back,—by others which are of a rich rufous-grey,—by others again which are grey,—and, lastly, by individuals which are of a cream colour,—and as all these specimens agree very closely in size and proportions,—we can but conclude that they form one and the same variable species. Upon comparing the skins, or stuffed specimens, of this Tasmanian Phalanger, with those of the *Phalangista vulpina* of New South Wales, the only tolerably constant difference which could be perceived was that the island animal was larger than that of the mainland, and two skulls of Tasmanian specimens presented a corresponding difference of size when compared with the crania of the common *P. vulpina*.” Our own investigations corroborate Mr. Waterhouse’s opinion. There is a difference in size, and some slight alteration in the position of the teeth, but these characteristics may only belong to certain individuals, and probably occur in mainland specimens also. It would be interesting to secure a series of young of the dark variety, and compare them with the young of the light-coloured species. If really different, these dark-coloured animals would show indications of it even before the hair has appeared; and we shall prove hereafter, when speaking of the Kangaroo tribe, that certain places which, in the adult animal, are covered with black hair, are marked accordingly in the naked young.

The aborigines of Tasmania are now extinct, and the Phalangers have no other enemy except the Tiger Cat, or Tasmanian Dasyure, and civilized man; but with all the scientific weapons at their command the hunters cannot perceptibly diminish them. On the mainland these animals have become a perfect pest in some districts. Their nocturnal and arboreal habits, their food and number of young, are well known, and are the same as those of New Holland.